

In Search of Wholeness: Thoughts on Parashat Terumah, February 28, 2009

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In relating the instructions for building the Mishkan (Tabernacle), the parasha indicates that the Tablets of the Law (the Ten Commandments) are to be placed in the ark. The ark was to become a central feature in the spiritual life of the people of Israel, and the Tablets were to be an ongoing reminder of the Revelation at Mt. Sinai. We know, however, that there were two sets of Tablets given at Sinai. The first were shattered by Moses when he descended the mountain and found the Israelites worshipping a golden calf. A second set of Tablets was given to Moses, and this set remained intact.

The Talmud (Berakhot 8b) reports the tradition that both sets of Tablets--the shattered and the whole-- were kept in the ark. A moral lesson is drawn that we should show honor to elderly sages who have forgotten their Torah due to their mental decline in old age. Just as we honored them when they were "whole", so we are to honor them when they are "shattered". The shattered Tablets and the whole Tablets are revered.

Perhaps we can draw another lesson from the placement of both sets of Tablets in the ark. Each individual has strengths, virtues, accomplishments. These reflect us at our best, when we are "whole". But each individual also has weaknesses, moral blemishes, failures. These reflect the "shatterings" within us. What are we to do with our failures?

One approach is to ignore our shortcomings, and concentrate only on our strengths. This is the way of egocentrism and arrogance. Another approach is to focus on our shortcomings to such an extent that we become guilt-ridden and self-hating. This is the way of negativity, making us feel powerless and unworthy.

The holy ark teaches us how to be "whole" human beings: we store both sets of Tablets within our holy arks--our inner selves. We recognize our good qualities, but we do not disdain our failures. We bring our "shattered" selves along with our "intact" selves. We learn from our errors. If we are contrite for foolish decisions, for missed opportunities, for failing others when they needed us--we can not let these failings destroy us; but neither can we go on with our lives as though they never happened. We live as "whole" human beings when we can integrate our

virtues and vices, our strengths and weaknesses, our successes and failures. The "whole" Tablets remind us of how good we can be. The "shattered" Tablets remind us how we have sometimes fallen short--but how we can regain our footing and do better next time.

The ark in the Mishkan held both sets of Tablets of the Law, just as our inner selves hold both sets of our own personal Tablets of our lives. Ultimately, this strategy teaches us humility as well as confidence; it teaches us to look to our strengths but not to forget our weaknesses; it helps us strive to become whole human beings.

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